

I am writing this story sitting in Haluaghat in the district of Mymensingh. It is pretty much on the same latitude as say, Tahirpur in Sunamganj. With the rolling hills of Meghalaya being just a stone's throw away, there are many similarities between the two. It would take six hours by car to reach one from the other.

But as this article goes to print, one has food aplenty, and the other has none. While the people of Haluaghat are cooking *binni-bhaat* from the *amon* production of late autumn, many of the farmers in Sunamganj could not plant any rice, let alone have a harvest.

And while the fields of Haluaghat are being prepped with *boro* seedlings, the tiny slivers of green disappearing into the winter fog, the haor lands of Sunamganj are still underwater.

"The waters still have not receded and there is no place to plant *boro*," Qamruzzaman Kamrul, the upazila chairman of Tahirpur told *The Daily Star's* Moulvibazar correspondent. Tahirpur had some of the worst-hit areas last year.

"There was a depression in the ocean causing the flood-waters to rise again in December. Rising floods after monsoon is over is highly unusual," says Abu Bakr Siddiq Bhuiyan, the Executive Engineer of the Sunamganj branch of Water Development Board (BWDB).

This was the big story last year—how terrible the floods were—but that was hardly the entire story. The government is not equipped to deal with the effects of climate change, and that is not due to a lack of initiative or resources—it is solely because of a lack of honesty. The rains laid bare the rampant corruption going on in BWDB.

The warnings that climate change experts have been doling out for years, asking the government to step up its efforts, culminated into a disastrous predicament as three-fourths of the country went underwater by July.

The media hue and cry led to 61 officials of BWDB being sued for corruption by the Anti-Corruption Commission. This included people as high up as Sunamganj Executive Engineer Afsar Uddin, former Superintendent Engineer of Sylhet Nurul Islam Sarkar and former Additional Chief Engineer (northwest zone) Md Abdul Hye, and people at the bottom like contractor Bacchu Miah. What the newsmen are not aware of, however, is that, once the cameras were turned away by the end of the year, the case was stayed, and that too by contractor Bacchu Miah.

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PROJECT MONEY GETTING WASHED AWAY BY FLOODS?

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"I cannot proceed with my investigation right now, because this case has been stayed," stated Khurshid Alam Khan, the chief lawyer of the case filed by the ACC last week. "The court stayed the case on December 12 last year, and we are not being able to do our work," he added. On a positive note, the Supreme Court threw out the stay order just three days ago.

Nor is it immediately clear how many people have been brought into police custody so far—one of the few traces one can find of this is the much publicised arrest of a Jubo League leader, Khairul Alam, from the airport in Dhaka. He was a contractor who was awarded five packages but did not deliver the dams in time.

This lawsuit, with its long list of accused, is by far one of the most highlighted cases filed against the water development board by the ACC.

One of the BWDB projects under scrutiny for corruption spent BDT 704 crores over a period of five years until 2016 to do flood control work specifically in the haor areas. It targeted Sunamganj, Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Netrokona and Kishoreganj, with the most work to be done in Sunamganj. Even though the project was supposed to be completed in 2016, the haors were underwater by March. *Star Weekend* went to Tahirpur, one of the project areas, last year, in search of the elusive dams that BWDB was supposed to

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build and found only miles of flood water.

So many projects, so much money but where are the dams?

But that is hardly the only flood control project that targeted this crucial northeastern region recently, thus raising the question: why did the interventions fail when the floods came? These are the other projects that also happened in the past few years, according to documents released by the BWDB.

BWDB received BDT 25 crores for flood control in 15 areas of Kishoreganj, Habiganj, Sunamganj, Sylhet and Moulvibazar between 2013 and 2014. The work to be done included processes like river dredging and different construction activities like building compartment dykes, river embankments, levees, pipe sluice, etc. The project is titled "Kalni-Kushia River Management Project" but last year 13 villages of Fenchuganj upazila were set afloat before the monsoon came, as reported by the media. Fenchuganj was one of the beneficiaries of this project.

Here is another instance. The project titled "Water Control Development Project" began in 2012 with BDT 98 crores, in many areas including five upazilas of Sylhet, Moulvibazar and Habiganj. Kulaura, one of the beneficiaries of this project which aimed to build embankments, was left at a standstill by floods for several months last year. Yet another project,

which finished in 2015, targeted the embankments of the Surma.

Next year a massive project by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is supposed to inject BDT 910 crores into rehabilitating old flood control systems (like embankments) in the haor areas. The government is implementing the project.

The amount of resources spent by the government to do flood control is by no means insignificant—then why are the flood waters coming in early and staying late?

Transparency International Bangladesh pointed fingers at the contractors. The organisation studied six projects under the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF), a pool of money set up specifically to counter extreme weather events, and found them to be rife with corruption.

"No information is provided to the local community about the contractor selection process," states the report, also adding this about a specific project, "Schedule of the infrastructural work was not opened to the local people in any project. When community people approached the contractor, he directed the people to BWDB, but BWDB also did not make it open for all."

This unfair contractor selection process also meant shoddy work, concludes the report. Take one 3.3 kilometre embankment studied by these researchers: "During the study it was observed that the construction [was] severely damaged in 10-15 places even before the project period was over. The situation got even worse during rainy season," states the report.

Just as the money for projects rose to crores, the number of farmers affected by the floods rose to the hundred thousands. The sheer number of those

affected comes with the staggering realisation that the actions of some individuals can cause an entire system to break down.

The body also found that money is available, but not going where it is most needed. "For instance, Dhaka division has received 19 percent of the total fund of the BWDB implemented climate projects funded by BCCTF, whereas some of the more vulnerable division, Khulna, received only 10 percent of the funding," states the report.

Although it was not possible for *Star Weekend* to independently determine which projects of BWDB are getting money from the BCCTF, there is one example we can provide that shows how questionable the resource allocation was. A project to preserve the ecology and the *sal* woods of the Gazipur Eco Park was given money under the fund. While preserving woodlands anywhere in the country is an important initiative, the *sal* woods of Dhaka are not exactly on the frontier of climate change effects the same way the coastlines are. The Eco Park woods, nestled in the centre of the country, do not get inundated by flash floods like Sylhet, nor are they affected by the rise in sea-level like parts of Khulna are.

Inadequate relief-provision post floods

Last year when *Star Weekend* took a boat to the far edges of Shonir Haor and Matian Haor during the flash floods of summer, one thing was obvious—not everyone was getting relief. Small pockets of people who were stranded on islets, and were too poor to own boats, could not make it to the mainlands to collect relief. With not enough rice to go about, emaciated

people waded the shallow banks of their strips of land, net in hand, in search of tiny fish and crustaceans.

Half-a-year later when the operations are over, it has become apparent just how inadequate the relief was. The Centre for Policy Dialogue took stock of the whole scenario and presented their findings in a press conference in Dhaka.

Turns out, the relief efforts reached only 68.4 percent of the affected farmers. Interestingly, only about 20 percent of the cultivable land destroyed by flash floods received support for replanting, like seeds, fertilisers etc, meaning it is not entirely clear who received support and for what. Fishermen whose pisciculture plots were washed away, received no support at all. In addition, 12 percent of the whole support was simply sent off to areas not affected by flash floods at all.

"The government has big plans to change how flood control is being done now," says engineer Abu Bakr Siddik Bhuiyan. "We will be dredging the rivers and building embankments on a larger scale."

Bhuiyan was placed as an Executive Engineer in Sunamganj because his predecessor Afsar Uddin is one of those sued by the ACC and has been removed from his post since then. Bhuiyan has big gaps to fill, and is not unaware of the precarious position he is in. He laughs when asked about what the pressure is like on him. "We are committed to take this issue seriously," is all he would say. Last year the first flash floods came towards the end of March. If there is a repeat performance this year, then it gives Bhuiyan three months to execute his commitment. ■



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